DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 312 691 CS 506 854

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TITLE What Kinds of Errors Are Salient in Communication?
PUB DATE Nov 89
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Psychonomic Society (30th, Atlanta, GA, November 10-12, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Dialogs (Language); Discourse Analysis; *Error Analysis (Language); Error Patterns; *Language Patterns; *Language Usage; Lexicology; Phonology; Pragmatics; *Speech Communication
IDENTIFIERS *Conversation; Conversational Flow; Salience

ABSTRACT

The flow of normal conversation is often impeded by error. These errors can be divided into at least three categories: phonological, lexical, and pragmatic. A study was designed to assess whether different kinds of errors affect conversation in different ways. Forty-four subjects listened to tapes of conversations. Each conversation contained either no error or one of the three error types. All subjects heard 12 different conversations. Following the taped conversations, the subjects evaluated the speakers and rated the realism of the conversation. They then engaged in a 2-minute distractor task before being asked to recall the errors. Forty-four additional subjects were asked to read transcripts of the conversations before participating in the remainder of the activities. The immediate evaluations of the participants were most strongly affected by the presence of pragmatic errors. In contrast, later memory for the conversations that were read was best when they contained phonological errors. This suggests that different kinds of errors influence conversation in different ways. (Five graphs are included.) (MG)

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What Kinds of Errors are Salient in Communication?

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Presented at the 30th annual meeting of the Psychonomic Society
Atlanta, Georgia
November, 1989

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❶ ABSTRACT

The flow of normal conversation is often impeded by error. These errors can be divided into at least three categories: phonological (articulatory slips), lexical (use of the wrong word), and pragmatic (e.g., unintentional violations of Grice's Cooperative Principle). The present study was designed to assess whether different kinds of errors affect the conversation in different ways.

Subjects were asked to either listen to or read conversations that contained the above-mentioned errors. The immediate evaluations of the participants were most strongly affected by the presence of pragmatic errors. In contrast, later memory for the conversations that were read was best when they contained phonological errors. This suggests that different kinds of errors influence conversation in different ways.

❷ WHAT ARE THE GOALS OF CONVERSATION?

Participants in conversations have many goals. Two crucial goals are to establish understanding and to "avoid trouble" (Clark & Schaefer, 1989, p. 265).

HOW IS THIS ACCOMPLISHED?

One mechanism — participants actively monitor conversations for errors or ambiguity (Clark & Schaefer, 1989).

When trouble does arise, participants may need to make repairs. These repairs are typically made as soon as possible (Levelt, 1983; Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977).

An implicit assumption is that all errors will have the same impact on the conversation process. The goal of the current research is to explore this assumption.

❸ A TAXONOMY OF ERROR TYPES

Phonological errors — these include articulatory slips, mispronunciations, and sound transpositions.

Lexical errors — this category principally refers to errors in word choice, and can include planning errors.

Pragmatic errors — these are unintended violations of Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, and its maxims (e.g., be brief, be relevant).

Although other errors occur in conversation (e.g., syntactic errors), other theorists have made similar distinctions between error types (e.g., Grimshaw, 1988, p. 314).

❹ EXAMPLES OF STIMULUS MATERIALS

NO ERROR

A: Isn't this a great restaurant?

B: I'm really impressed. I haven't been here before, but all my friends are raving about this place.

A: Well, the best is yet to come. Wait until they bring out the desserts!

B: I'm not so sure I should have any. I feel stuffed already.

A: If you want, you can try some of my dessert — I'm going to order the chocolate mousse.

B: So *this* is your new diet plan?

A: Very funny. I'm planning to starve myself *next* week — this week is already a lost cause, so I'm just going to enjoy myself.

PHONOLOGICAL

A: I picked up my new car last weekend.

B: You did? What kind did you get?

A: It's a four foor, four-*doar* Civic.

B: That's great! It must be nice to have a new car.

A: It will be until I start making my payments, anyway.

B: Yeah, I'm still paying mine off, and it's already four years old!

❺ EXAMPLES OF STIMULUS MATERIALS

LEXICAL

A: I couldn't find that book on Plato, no, Aristotle.

B: Did you try the campus bookstore?

A: Yeah, and even the one at the mall, but they didn't have it either.

B: Did you think about special ordering it?

A: Won't that take too long?

B: At least you'd get it eventually. You can borrow mine until it comes in.

A: That'd really be a big help, thanks.

PRAGMATIC

A: Would you believe I got *another* speeding ticket today?

B: Not again! What happened this time?

A: Same thing as always. They have this speed trap I have to drive through to get to work, and I was late again, so . . .

B: You should find some other way to get to work. Why don't you try using that exit at Washington street?

A: Don't the police have anything better to do?

B: Well, what's wrong with the Washington street exit?

A: They've got it blocked off for the next few months. I think they're paving it.

B: Oh. That doesn't leave you too many options, does it?

❻ GENERAL METHOD

Forty-four subjects listened to tapes of conversations. Each conversation contained either no error, or one of the three error types.

All the subjects heard 12 different conversations. Four different sets were used. Each set contained equal numbers of the error conditions.

Immediately after hearing each conversation, the subjects evaluated the speakers, and rated the realism of the conversation.

After hearing all 12 conversations, the subjects engaged in a two-minute distractor task. Following the distractor task, the subjects were asked to recall the errors.

Forty-four additional subjects were asked to *read* transcripts of the conversations. In all other respects, this reading condition was identical to the aural condition.

❼ DEPENDENT MEASURES

Speaker evaluation — subjects were asked to describe the personality of both speakers in each conversation.

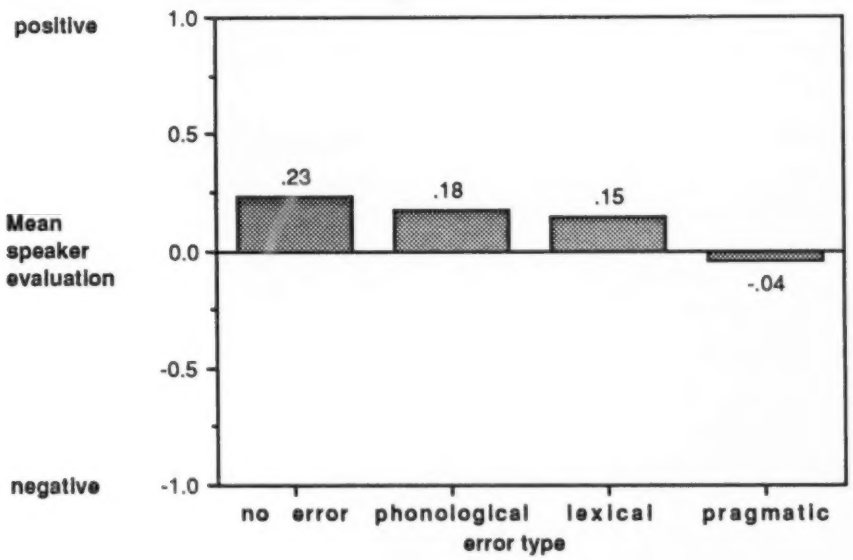
The personality characteristics were later coded by the experimenters on a five-point desirability scale ("very undesirable trait" to "very desirable trait").

Realism ratings — subjects were asked to rate the realism of each conversation on a five-point scale, ranging from "unrealistic" to "realistic." The subjects were instructed to evaluate how similar each conversation was to their own conversations.

Error recall — subjects were told that errors had occurred in some of the conversations. They were asked to recall as many of these errors as they could.

❽ RESULTS — SPEAKER EVALUATION

Main effect of error type



People who make pragmatic errors are evaluated more negatively than people who make no errors. The phonological, lexical, and no error conditions do not differ from one another.

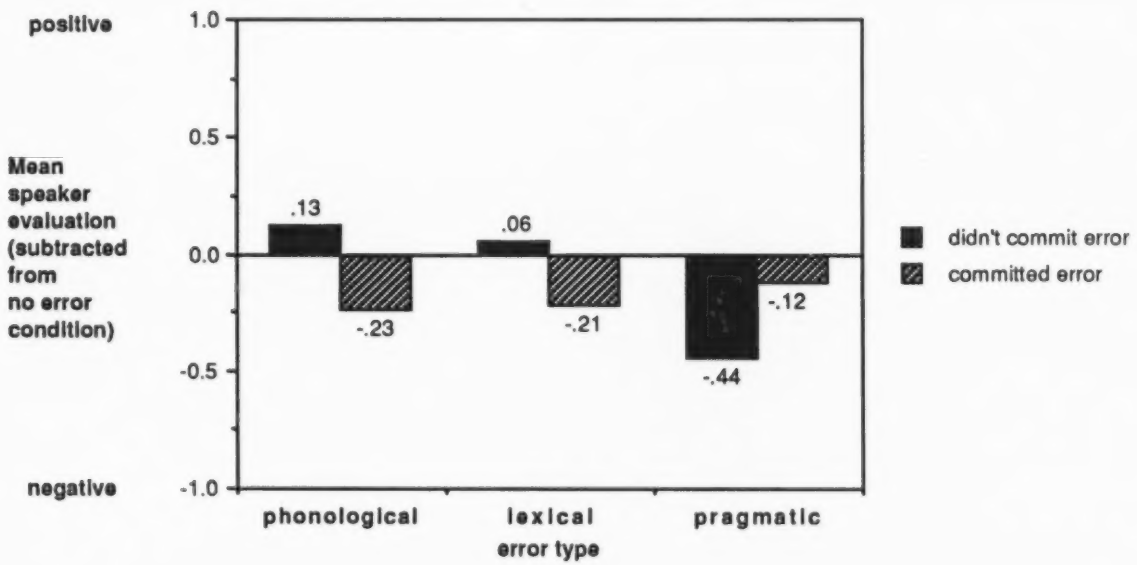
Immediately after hearing or reading the conversations, speaker evaluations are most strongly affected by pragmatic errors.

Modality (reading versus hearing the conversations) did not affect speaker evaluations.

❾ RESULTS — SPEAKER EVALUATION

Main effect of blame — people who make errors are evaluated more negatively than people who do not make errors.

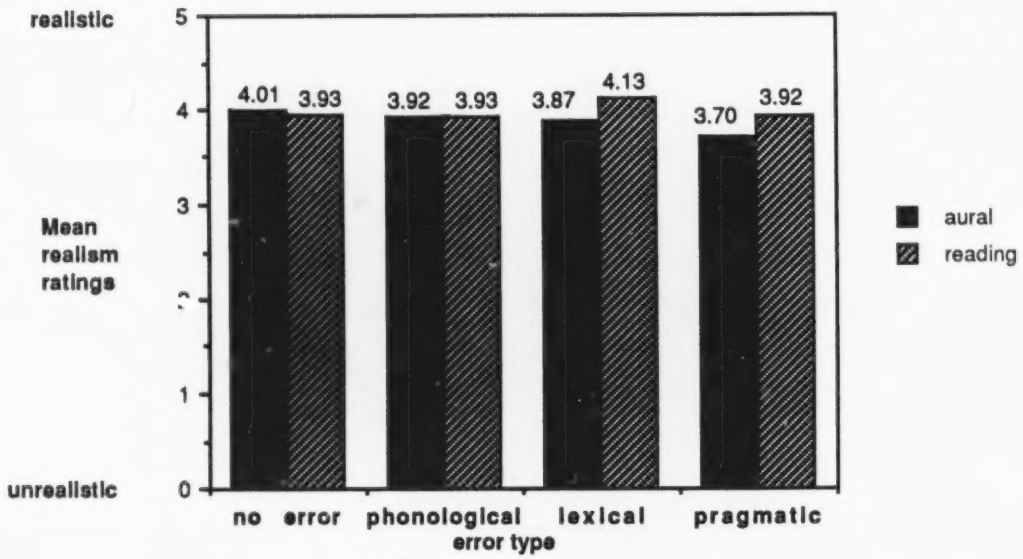
Interaction of blame and error type



In dyads where an error occurs, the individual who does not make the error is evaluated positively. However, in the pragmatic condition, they are evaluated much less positively.

⑩ RESULTS — REALISM RATINGS

No main effect of realism

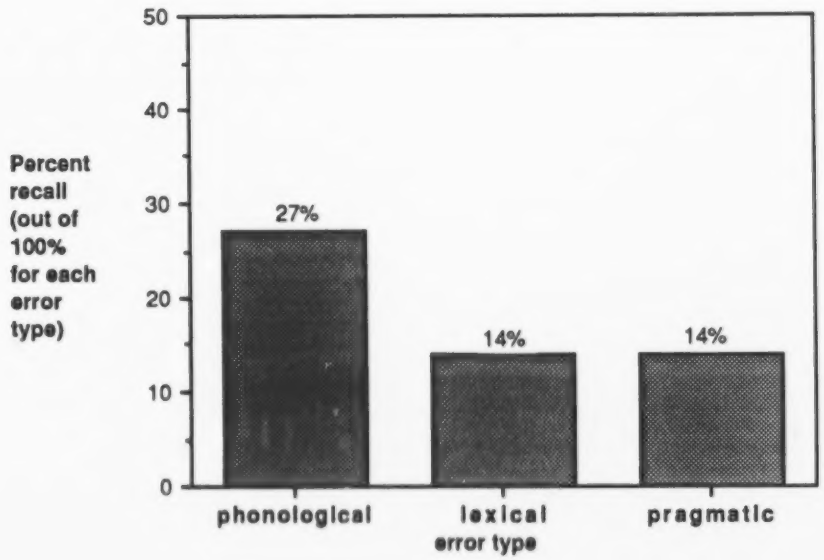


The conversations were given consistently high realism ratings. These ratings were unaffected by error type or modality (reading versus hearing).

Differences in speaker evaluations across error type, therefore, cannot be attributed to differences in realism.

⓫ RESULTS — ERROR RECALL

Main effect of error type



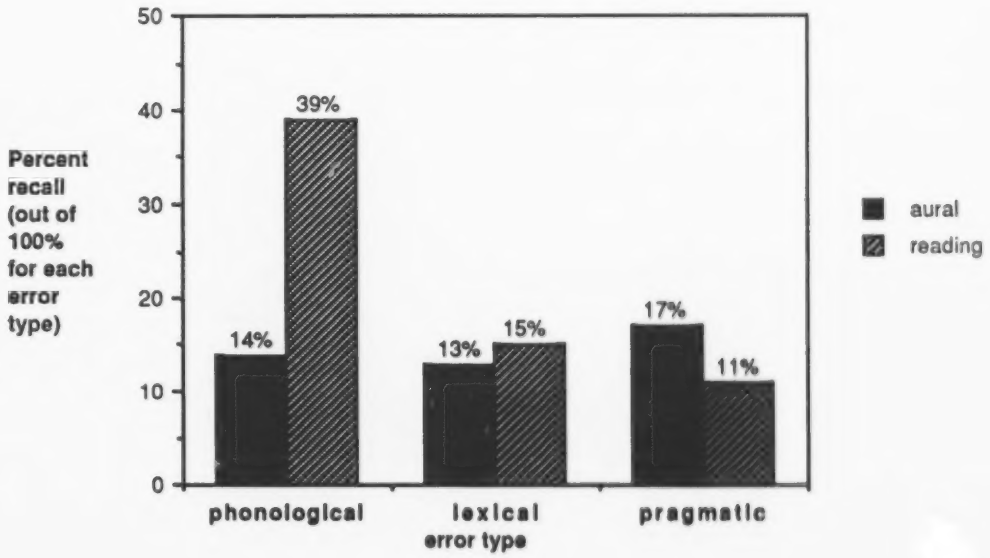
Phonological errors were better recalled than either lexical or pragmatic errors.

Out of 36 different errors, only three were never recalled by any of the subjects (two lexical, one pragmatic). The errors could be differentiated and remembered.

Main effect of modality — conversations that were read yielded better error recall (22%) than conversations that were heard (15%).

❶❷ RESULTS — ERROR RECALL

Interaction of modality by error type



Subjects who listened to the conversations recalled similar numbers of phonological, lexical, and pragmatic errors. Subjects who read the conversations, however, recalled more phonological errors than either lexical or pragmatic errors.

Subjects were typically unaware (97%) of the error manipulation. However, when asked to recall the errors, subjects rarely confused the conversations and their respective errors.

❶❸ SUMMARY OF RESULTS

As the subjects heard or read the conversations, their judgments were affected most strongly by pragmatic errors. However, after the distractor task, the subjects who had read the conversations principally recalled *phonological* errors.

Pragmatic errors may involve *both* participants to a greater degree than either phonological or lexical errors. This may explain the more negative evaluation of the person who did not commit the error.

Written conversations (e.g., dialog) rarely contain phonological errors. Therefore, these errors may have been unusually distinctive, and may be respcnsible for the relatively higher levels of recall.

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